World Cultural Heritage

Nara Palace Site

Suzaku Gate

Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties
Suzaku Gate and Suzaku Boulevard in the Nara Capital

At the northern end of the ancient Shimotsu-michi Road, established in the seventh century, extending north in a straight line from the Fujiwara Capital, rose the Rensui Gate, the main entrance of the Nara Capital. Going through it, the Suzaku Boulevard extended straight northward at a width of 75 meters. Willows were planted on both sides of the road. Some 4 kilometers distant stood the Suzaku Gate, the main entry to the Nara Palace.

A great earthen wall 6 meters high extended left and right from the Suzaku Gate, encircling the 1 square kilometer square of the palace precinct.

Emmissaries from foreign countries such as Silla Kingdom and Tang Dynasty were welcomed and sent off from in front of the Suzaku Gate, and occasionally large crowds gathered there for love-song festivals (Utakaki). At New Year’s the emperor sometimes came out to this gate and conducted celebrations.

The Suzaku Gate was protected by Palace Guards, and it was not open at all times. We can imagine that as the main entrance to the palace it stood with an authority and majesty.
Excavation of Suzaku Gate

The position and extent of the Suzaku Gate was firstly ascertained by the excavation in 1964. Several excavations had been conducted since then, and the entire part of the feature was re-excavated in advance of the reconstruction of the building in 1989.

Excavations revealed that the center-to-center distance of each pillar measured 17 shaku in ancient scale (approximately 5 meters), and the building measured 5 bays long in width (ca. 25 meters) and 2 bays long in depth (ca. 10 meters).

It was also revealed that the foundation of the gate platform was carefully made by trench foundation method filled by rammed earth, and natural stones were used as the foundation stones. The excavated roof tiles suggested that they were reused ones from the Fujiwara Palace.

Excavation in 1990
(from the east)

Excavated fragment of a foundation stone
(Length: 2m; Width: 1.3 m; Height: 0.6 m)

Excavated eave tiles
(Recycling tiles from the Fujiwara Palace)

Plan of archaeological features
(Documentation of the excavation result)
Research toward the reconstruction of Suzaku Gate

There are no materials directly related to the structural form of the Suzaku Gate. As the Suzaku Gate of Heian Palace was a two-story gate this reconstruction was also made in two stories, and the basic structure was modeled after the Middle Gate of the Hōryū-ji temple, the only surviving example from the ancient period. Since the Suzaku Gate was a building of the first half of the Nara period, the contemporary East Pagoda of the Yakushi-ji temple was referred to for style. Further, as the Suzaku Gate is large in scale, the Tegai Gate of the Todai-ji temple, which is close to it in this regard, was referred to for the size and proportions of the separate components.

In advance of the reconstruction, a draft plan was drawn and a scale model based upon it was made for further consideration of the reconstruction plan. Then the preparation of the full-scale reconstruction was completed.

Reconstruction of detailing

The detailing was also considered along with the structure. While some detailing such as designs of eave tiles were reconstructed modeled after the excavated materials, many other detailing still remained unknown in detail. They were referred to existing buildings and excavated materials from other sites, such as the five-story pagoda of the Kairyo-ji temple for the fine details of the roof, finds from the Lecture Hall of the Shitenno-ji temple for the wind bells, finds from the Yakushi-ji temple for the decorative metal plates on the ends of tail rafters, and example of the Main Hall of Toshodai-ji temple and findings from the Taiheiji temple site of Kashiwara city and the Naniwa Palace Site for the ridge end ornaments.
Reconstruction of Suzaku Gate

Reconstruction of the Suzaku Gate began with the rebuilding of the platform in 1989. The reconstruction of the platform was finished in 1992, and the reconstruction of the building began in 1993. After five years, the gate was totally reconstructed in 1998.

In the reconstruction of the Suzaku Gate, the total amount of used timbers reached approximately 1,000 cubic meters, including eighteen pillars (70 centimeters in diameter and 5.3 meters in length), which were logged at Yoshino, Nara Prefecture. The roof was covered with approximately forty-two thousand roof tiles.
Design and structural reinforcement of the reconstruction

Nara period buildings had a structural fragility peculiar to that era, and structural safety was not checked according to modern standards. Modern building standard was to be applied for the reconstructed Suzaku Gate. In this regard, while first designing it purely as a piece of Nara period architecture, reinforcement was added as necessary in order to reconstruct it as an actual building.

In this reconstruction, it was hypothesized that the building had survived from the Nara period to the present, to be preserved as a traditional wooden structure with all of the modifications that may have been added, using construction methods newly developed in the Medieval and Early Modern periods, hidden from view.

For example, diagonal bracing was added to the roof truss, and walls for the first story were strengthened with wooden frames and metal fittings.
The course of research and reconstruction

Year | Item
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1964 | Excavations in the northern part of the Suzaku Gate were conducted (16th and 17th investigations), ascertaining the position and extent of the gate.
1965 | A 1:10 scale model of the Suzaku Gate was made.
1979 | Excavation at the southern end of the gate was conducted (112-11th investigation).
1980 | A full scale model of bracket complex was made.
1981 | Excavation of the Great Wall in the west side of the gate was conducted (136th investigation). The Great Wall in the west side of the gate was reconstructed.
1982 | Excavation of the Great Wall in the east side of the gate was conducted (143rd investigation). The Great Wall in the east side of the gate was reconstructed.
1986 | “Research on the Design and Structure of Suzaku Gate, Nara Palace” began.
1989 | Funds were allocated for the 1989 fiscal year for reconstruction of the platform of the Suzaku Gate. Re-excavation and ground preparation began. The east and west corners of the area in front of the gate were excavated (201st investigation).
1990 | Re-excavation of the entire feature of the Suzaku Gate was conducted (211th investigation).
1992 | An experimental trial of earthquake resistant wall was conducted by a full scale model. Reconstruction of the gate’s platform was completed.
1993 | Reconstruction of the gate building began.
1994 | Commencement ceremony was conducted.
1997 | Topping-out ceremony was conducted.
1998 | Reconstruction of the Suzaku Gate was completed.
2000 | Both sides of the Great Wall connecting with the gate were reconstructed.

30 minutes walk from Yamato Saidaiji station of Kintetsu Railway.
Or, take a bus to Saidaiji from JR Nara station and Kintetsu Nara station, or to JR Nara station from Yamato Saidaiji station, and get off at Heijō-kyōseki bus stop, and walk for 20 minutes.
Or, take a bus from JR Nara station and Kintetsu Nara station and get off at Nijo-Ōji Minami-Nichōme bus stop, and walk for 3 minutes.
Free admission.
Open daily 9:00-16:30
Closed on Monday (except for National Holidays on Monday, in which case the museum is open on the holiday and closed the following Tuesday instead), year-end holidays, and other dates for temporary closing.

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